

## Parkland College

---

A with Honors Projects

Honors Program

---

2018

# Identity Crisis in Gaslight

Savannah Weishaar  
*Parkland College*

---

### Recommended Citation

Weishaar, Savannah, "Identity Crisis in Gaslight" (2018). *A with Honors Projects*. 238.  
<https://spark.parkland.edu/ah/238>

Open access to this Essay is brought to you by Parkland College's institutional repository, [SPARK: Scholarship at Parkland](#). For more information, please contact [spark@parkland.edu](mailto:spark@parkland.edu).

### Identity Crisis in *Gaslight*

In the 1944 film *Gaslight*, the main character Paula, who is brilliantly portrayed by Ingrid Bergman, has problems with her sense of self. The movie focuses on Paula's life after adolescence. After her aunt – who is also her guardian – is murdered, Paula is sent to Italy to be with a trusted singing teacher so she can be a famous opera singer like her aunt. Paula spends several years in Italy where she meets a man named Gregory. Gregory and Paula seem to “fall in love” in a matter of two weeks and decide to get married. After their marriage, Gregory convinces Paula to move back to London to live in the townhouse her aunt had left to her. During their time in London, Paula seemingly goes mad – only later to be convinced by a detective that Gregory has simply been manipulating her the entire time. While the movie plays out these essential moments in Paula's life – she never seems to have control over *any* of them. This is because Paula never develops a true sense of self; consequently, her entire life is an identity crisis.

After her aunt is murdered, Paula, at the age of fourteen, is encouraged to move to Italy to live with Signor Guardi, her aunt's singing instructor. During this time in her life Paula expects to become an opera singer. Upon her departure from London, she is told, “You've got to forget everything that's happened here. That's why you're going to Italy, to Signor Guardi. He was the best friend your aunt ever had, and he'll be yours, too. Perhaps Signor Guardi will make you into a great singer, as she was. Wouldn't you like that?” Paula's responds with an uncertain and very slight nod suggesting that maybe she really would *not* like that. According to the article “Identity

Crisis” from *World of Psychology*, “Identity crisis is a term coined by psychoanalyst Erik Erikson (1964) to describe the crisis that happens in one’s self when there are conflicting or confusing identities or senses of self.” Erikson says that “the most dramatic of the crises would occur during adolescence, when teenagers are seeking an adult identity. The crisis occurs because the individual is not yet an adult, but has not yet completely left childhood behind.” Paula is going through this identity crisis related to adolescence right when her life is uprooted by her aunt’s murder. Because of this, Paula never gets to make a healthy transition from adolescence to adulthood, and thus has issues with her sense of self as she heads into her first romantic relationship.

She began a romantic relationship with Gregory whom she had known for a total of two weeks before agreeing to marry him. After some master manipulation, along with Gregory disclosing his “dream” of living with Paula in London she agrees to marry him and move, “Yes, you shall have your dream. You shall have your house in a square.” Just like that, Paula throws away her life in Italy to move back to a city and house that has haunted her since her aunt’s death, all to marry a man she barely knows. A sense of self or self-concept is “who you believe you are” (*Psychology in your Life* pg. 461), and Paula has realized that being an opera singer is not a part of her self-concept. However, since Paula does not have a true sense of self, she immediately jumps to the next available identity, which is “wife”. Without a true identity, or self-concept, she is extremely vulnerable to manipulation. Gregory takes full advantage of this and is able to slowly convince Paula that she has gone mad.

After Gregory and Paula move into the townhouse in London, Gregory begins to manipulate Paula. During this time in her life Paula feels as though she has become “insane”. Gregory’s plan to manipulate Paula is extremely systematic and successful. He begins by making

her believe she is losing things by stealing them himself. Then, he convinces her that she is imagining things and thus is too ill to leave the house. Gregory even goes as far as telling her that her mother was institutionalized in an asylum – rewriting her entire history and sense of where she came from. After these and several other instances of Gregory setting up Paula to appear and feel crazy, she breaks down, “I hear noises and footsteps. I imagine things, that there are people over the house. I'm frightened of myself, too.” She is truly afraid and thinks she has gone crazy, but in reality she is not imagining these things at all – the noises, footsteps, and misplaced things are all Gregory’s doing. For Paula to question her very own sanity and eventually believe she has gone mad goes to show how little Paula really knows about herself. *Psychology in your Life* asks readers to “Stop and think for a moment about ... ways that you can answer the question ‘Who am I?’ Your answers reveal your sense of self.” If Paula were to try and answer this question, based on the movie, it seems she might answer “an opera singer, a wife, a crazy person” but in reality she is none of these things. She never wanted to be a singer. While she is legally Gregory’s wife, their love is not real. Last but not least, she is not insane – a little lost, yes – but definitely not clinically mad.

One of the only times Paula speaks up for herself in the entire movie is at the end when Gregory is tied up and has been exposed for who he really is. In this famous scene, Paula mocks and taunts her husband as he begs her to cut him loose, saying, “If I were not mad, I could have helped you. Whatever you had done, I could have pitied and protected you. But because I am mad, I hate you. Because I am mad, I have betrayed you, and because I am mad I am rejoicing in my heart without a shred of pity, without a shred of regret, watching you go with glory in my heart!” With these last words to Gregory, Paula calls detective Cameron to take him away. It seems that for the first time Paula is sure of herself. She is sure she is not a singer, no longer a

wife, and never had been insane. While she is sure that she is none of these things, she still does not know who she *is*. In the movie, this is the closest Paula comes to having her own self-concept. However, she did not come to these realizations on her own, but once again was told by a man who she was or was not. When Paula insisted that she must be insane Cameron replied, “No. You’re slowly and systematically being driven out of your mind.” With a little more convincing, Paula once again becomes a sane person – because a man tells her she is.

Paula’s lack of self-concept is to blame for her identity crisis throughout the film. Paula’s entire life has been defined by male figures. Never once has she ever seriously questioned or challenged the identity that has been placed upon her. First, she is sent to Italy and is told by Signor Guardi that she will be an opera singer like her aunt. Then, she is convinced that she is in love with Gregory and becomes a stranger’s wife. Next, she believes she has gone insane because her husband told her she was. Finally, she becomes her “own” person who is actually *not* insane because Cameron – the male police detective – told her she was not. During all of these events in Paula’s life, she does not ever reconsider being a singer, or give serious thought to marriage, or even look within herself to see if she could actually be doing the things Gregory was accusing her of. However, with the famous scene between Paula and Gregory mentioned previously, it seems as if Paula has finally given a male a piece of her mind for the first time in her life. Some might even say she found herself at the end of the movie, but in all reality this is not true at all. She is simply continuing to partake in the Hollywood cliché that a woman needs a man to rescue her. The ending is just like any other fairytale. Paula “the princess” is saved by Cameron her “knight in shining armor” and they live happily ever after. The end.

## Works Cited

Cukor, George, director. *Gaslight*. MGM, 1944

Grisson, Sarah, and Michael S. Gazzaniga. *Psychology in Your Life*. W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2017.

"Identity Crisis." *World of Sociology, Gale*, edited by Joseph M. Palmisano, Gale, 1st edition, 2001. *Credo Reference*, 27 Nov. 2018